

The “B” Word
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Last Monday, I flew to Gulfport, Mississippi accompanied by two of my Board colleagues, county staff and local city officials to bring aid and relief assistance to residents who suffer losses in the wake of Hurricane Katrina as well as to take note of lessons learned from this horrible disaster.

I believe it is our duty as Americans, in a time of crisis, to show a spirit of unity by coming to the aid of our fellow countrymen and lending a helping hand to those who suffer from great devastation.

For the past three weeks, my office has been working, in conjunction with local governments and the city of Gulfport, Mississippi to coordinate relief efforts. A call from Mayor Warr of Gulfport requesting assistance came during an emergency meeting of the Board of Supervisors which quickly fueled the need for immediate action. With the coordination of County and local city resources, four 18-wheel convoys filled with supplies for victims of Katrina left for Mississippi on Friday, September 16, with County and local government officials arriving in Gulfport on Monday, September 19.

In my mind, the spirit of cooperation fostered between local governments in Mississippi and San Bernardino County is a shining example of how our democracy works. That spirit, combined with this trip and newly fostered relationships, will prove to be an invaluable resource for Emergency Operations personnel throughout the County. This trip will help us to reassess our current state of the County and allow us unique insight, from those that have lived through this devastation, to work on our County disaster preparedness plan. It is evident to me that this trip has changed so many lives, including my own. No event has affected me in my thirteen years of public service as the experience of that day.

While I was not prepared for what I saw that day, I also was not fully prepared for the malicious editorial that called our County relief effort a “Boondoggle.” I am outraged, but not entirely surprised. It is evident that personal and political agendas are at work here.

It is evident that the San Bernardino Sun/Inland Valley Daily Bulletin is not interested in the human lives that have been changed; upon our arrival, the tears of joy felt by residents and government officials in Gulfport; or even the lessons we have learned from this experience.

What the editor is interested in is controversy and the scandal he hopes to uncover in this humanitarian relief effort. This is not objective reporting. This is simply an attempt to discredit hundreds of people in this great County who give from their hearts and pocketbooks in an attempt to make a difference for their fellow countrymen. It is our County’s proactive response to extend a hand of friendship to those in need, while others sit on the sidelines ridiculing our efforts.

As an educator of 35 years, many words come to mind when I think of the relief effort extended to the citizens of Gulfport. Perhaps this is a good opportunity to educate our critics regarding other words that could have been used to describe our efforts; words not too far in the dictionary from their misused word of “boondoggle.”

The word “boon” comes to mind. It means “a petition or prayer, a welcomed benefit, a close friend.” It is more than appropriate considering the relief given and the life-long friendships that were formed. The word “boost” would also be applicable, meaning “to raise up, to urge others to support, an act that helps or promotes.” We acted in a way that raised up our fellow Americans devastated by this overwhelming tragedy. I urge others to put their energy into supporting those in need rather than to criticize those who help.

This trip certainly could have been described as a “bonafide” effort meaning “in good faith, made or done without fraud or deceit.” It was paid for without taxpayer dollars, in good faith, by those who wanted to do more than just send their money but give of themselves.

Regardless of which words should have been used, “boondoggle” should not have been one of them. Another “B” word, “botched,” comes to mind when reading the editorial that trashed and debased our relief efforts. The definition of “botched” is “a bungling or unskillful piece of work.” Such as, “Those responsible for the ‘botched’ editorial should be held accountable.”

I witnessed firsthand people whose daily struggle is just to stay alive. I am glad that we could lend a helping hand where government and national relief organizations are falling short.

I am glad that we had the opportunity to exercise the spirit of humanity. I hope that in the future those who are cynical of our trip would exercise a level of humility, compassion and above all objective reporting.

I am proud of the many who participated (and continue to participate) through their donations and their efforts, from San Bernardino County employees to the outstanding cities and citizens who have all answered the call. In the words of Mark Uffer, our CAO, “This is just the beginning of our finest hour.” Continued prayers and donations will help our American brothers and sisters survive this colossal tragedy.